

The Secret Process

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State Board of Education ended up a victim of that secrecy



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It's ironic that Kentucky taxpayers will know far more about Ernie Fletcher and Steve Beshear than they really want to know before the November gubernatorial election, but they will know next to nothing about the men and women hired to run the state's costly education systems until shortly before the contracts are signed.

In a few weeks, Kentucky will hire a new president of the Council on Postsecondary Education, the top administrator of the agency that oversees the state's eight public universities. Last month, Kentucky hired a new commissioner of the state Department of Education, and that experience should serve as a warning to members of the Council on Postsecondary Education.

It turned into a public relations disaster for both the State Board of Education and the new commissioner the board hired, Illinois local school superintendent Barbara Erwin. The problem is that the process of selecting top-level administrators is cloaked in

so much secrecy that it's a wonder anyone knows what's going on.

In the case of the new education commissioner, three finalists were named after months of a behind-the-scenes search process and within a short time, Erwin was announced as the top candidate for the job.

Only then were her credentials and resume made public, and apparently only then did anyone begin checking up on those credentials.

It was the nosy media and not the firm hired to oversee the search that discovered discrepancies in Erwin's resume, some minor, others not so minor, that Erwin explained as simple mistakes.

Again, it was the media that looked into Erwin's background and discovered there were as many critics of her management style in school districts in three states as there were supporters.

All of this apparently came out of left field to the Board of Education with the responsibility of hiring the best possible commissioner for Kentucky's public school system at a historic time in its progress.

The board stood by its decision, and only time will tell whether it made the right one or simply wanted to avoid an embarrassing admission of a flawed search process.

The Council on Postsecondary Education has been in a similar secret search for a replacement for retiring President Tom Layzell. Once again, a private search company seeks

out possible candidates, looks into their credentials and backgrounds and, in the end, presents the council with a handful of the best candidates to consider, again in secret.

Last week the Council put off for a few weeks making the finalists known, apparently because one of them decided not to seek the job after all.

And once again, when those finalists are announced, it's a sure bet their resumes will be inspected and checked thoroughly. Kentuckians can only hope whichever candidate is offered the top job in Kentucky higher education will live up to his or her resume and reputation.

While it's entirely understandable that candidates for new jobs want to keep that information from their current employers, there comes a time when they should be ready to go public and undergo the kind of scrutiny the taxpayers ought to demand of these highly-paid, high-profile positions of extreme importance.

And if they cannot stand up to that public scrutiny, for whatever reason, they shouldn't be applying for those jobs in the first place. The State Board of Education and the Council on Postsecondary Education should insist that the search firms they hire do the thorough job of vetting potential candidates justified by their high fees.

In the end, though, it's all the closed-door secrecy that inevitably leads to trouble. Just ask the members of the State Board of Education.